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ABSTRACT

The rapidly changing environment of the western states requires community colleges to renew their efforts to provide appropriate access to higher education, to contribute effectively to economic development, and to respond to both local and state priorities. Each of these key contributions suggests a number of policy issues at both state and institutional levels. This paper provides brief overviews of major influences with respect to each of these community college roles, and then raises a number of questions presenting pressing community college issues. Access issues are introduced by discussions of population trends projecting increases in both minority youth and older adult student groups; rural and "exurban" population and economic growth; challenges to the open door philosophy; increased public attention to financial accountability and educational quality; and rapid social and economic changes and more varied student enrollment patterns. Questions related to economic development are raised within the context of the need for individuals and institutions to anticipate future developments and adapt continuously, of the growing needs of business and industry for specialized employee training, and of technological changes, particularly the use of computers, advanced telecommunications, and information technologies. Finally, issues are raised relating to community colleges' need to respond to state and local priorities in ways that combine responsiveness with accountability. (AYC)

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POLICY ISSUES FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Materials developed for a legislative workshop on community college issues

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Improving Education in The West

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POLICY ISSUES FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES

The rapidly changing environment of the western states requires community colleges to renew their efforts to provide appropriate access to higher education, to contribute effectively to economic development, and to respond to both local and state priorities. Each of these key contributions of community colleges suggests a number of policy issues at both state and institutional levels:

Issues Related to Access

Population trends in many of the western states indicate that minority youth will increase more rapidly than other population groups. At the same time, older individuals from a cross-section of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds are turning to community colleges in increasing numbers. This apparent duality in trends raises a number of issues for community colleges:

- What roles should community colleges play in providing access for the rapidly expanding youth populations while enhancing and diversifying options for adult education?
- Do current funding mechanisms need to be changed in response to shifts in community college enrollments and missions?
- How can more specialized education and training be provided to particular community college clientele without deemphasizing the importance of general education, liberal arts curricula, or baccalaureate transfer programs? Do state policies and governance systems provide adequate guidance to deal with these issues?

After years of rapid urban and suburban expansion, rural and "exurban" areas have seen substantial increases in population and economic growth. This diffusion of population and industrial centers raises a number of questions about geographical access and program availability:

- o Are rural populations adequately served by community college, particularly if population and economic expansion continue in these areas?
- o What changes will be required in programs and facilities to meet the needs of particular areas and populations?

A variety of challenges to the open door philosophy of community colleges have been posed by financial constraints and renewed emphasis on educational quality. Access to education could be affected in a number of ways:

- o Will higher community college tuition inhibit attendance? What is the appropriate relationship between tuition levels in community colleges and public universities?
- o Is financial aid adequately available to the growing proportions of part-time and adult students in community colleges?
- o Do high school graduation requirements pose non-financial barriers to open access in community colleges? How can state and institutional policies encourage student performance without limiting educational opportunity?
- o What effects will more stringent requirements for admission to public four-year institutions have on access and enrollments in community colleges?

Increased public attention to financial accountability and educational quality in public higher education raises a number of issues relating program content and student outcomes in community colleges:

- o What roles should community colleges play in providing remedial and compensatory programs? How do these roles relate to secondary education and access to postsecondary degree programs?
- o Who should pay for remediation—states, localities, or students?

- In order to maintain accountability and educational equality, what data are needed on student progression, achievement, job placement, and other measures of educational outcomes? Who should collect and report such data?

Rapid social and economic changes and more varied student enrollment patterns require diverse and specialized educational opportunities. At the same time, flexibility and student transfer opportunities should not be inhibited, and unnecessary program duplication need to be avoided. These conditions suggest a number of questions concerning program coordination, articulation, and flexibility.

- Would both access and effectiveness benefit from greater cooperation and coordination between community colleges, four-year institutions, and the variety of occupational and specialized training provided by proprietary institutions and corporations? How can states enhance this coordination?
- Are transfer opportunities and articulation policies adequate to assure student access to programs that will encourage them to fulfill their educational objectives?
- Can interstate reciprocity or other types of cooperative agreements through organizations such as WICHE play stronger roles in improving access and program coordination? How and in what areas or fields?

Economic Development

Rapid economic changes require individuals and institutions to anticipate future developments and to adapt continuously. Community colleges respond to changing employment needs and requirements, while helping to shape future job opportunities and the skills expected from employees. The central roles of community colleges in the western state economies raise a number of questions:

- How should community colleges adapt to changing local, state, national, and international economies? What modifications are necessary in terms of program content, delivery, organization, and financing? In what ways can community colleges play even stronger roles in local and state economic development strategies?

- How are community college training programs coordinated with research and development activities at public universities? Are community college transfer programs adequately linked to the more advanced technical education available at universities?

- What are the appropriate roles of community colleges in retraining workers displaced from declining local industries? Who should support such retraining? What actions should institutions and state agencies take to identify needs and coordinate such programs?

Business and industry have growing needs for specialized employee training in order to make use of new technologies, adapt to a changing marketplace, and compete effectively in the national and international economies. Community college contributions to meeting these needs suggest several questions:

- What roles should community colleges play in providing specialized employee training? What coordination and sharing of facilities and equipment are necessary to support these roles?

- Who should pay for employee training by community colleges--the state, the localities, or the businesses who benefit directly from the training?

- How can working relationships among community college, industry, and state economic development agenices be strenthened?

Technological changes, particularly the use of computers, advanced telecommunications, and information technologies, are rapidly altering our work, educational, and personal environments. Community colleges must respond to these changes in a number of ways:

- What roles should community colleges play in training for high technology industries and providing the skills required to live and work in an increasingly technological environment?

- Are community colleges making adequate use of audio-visual and computerized instructional systems in the design and delivery of educational services? Can new teaching and delivery systems be used to reach more effectively part-time and adult students, rural populations, and those with special educational needs?

- What resources and faculty incentives are needed to encourage greater use of these technologies to improve the quality and efficiency of community college programs?

- Does rapid technological change also require a renewed emphasis on basic educational competencies (for example in mathematics, effective communications and computer literacy) to provide individuals with the ability to meet the changing needs of employment and personal life?

Response to Local and State Priorities

Community colleges exercise multiple roles as both local institutions and integral components of state postsecondary systems. Combining responsiveness with accountability raises a number of issues:

- What special roles should community colleges play in meeting other educational needs within their districts or localities--for example, providing personal growth or avocational programs, extension services, and educational outreach activities? Who should make these program decisions and what support should be provided for such activities?

- What types of community service activities should community colleges engage in? What roles do community colleges play, not just as a center of formal learning and training, but as a focus for community activities, cultural events, and other types of social involvement?

- What is the proper balance between institutional autonomy and state accountability? Between serving local needs and being responsive to state policies and coordination? How can governing structures encourage cooperation and congruence between these perspectives?

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